

Metro file

INTERNATIONAL YMCA
MILE END ALLEY PROJECT REPORT
SUMMER 1969

R.S. Wilson
Director

Why an alley program?

The community served by International YMCA, primarily the district known as Mile End West, is bounded by Hutchison in the west, Van Horne in the north, St. Lawrence in the east and Pine avenue in the south. According to the 1961 census there are close to 10,000 children under the age of 14 in this area. The southern part of the area is made up of Jeanne Mance Park and Mount Royal, but apart from that and one tiny mini - playground at the extreme northern limit there are no parks in the entire district. Furthermore, although there are parks in the City of Outremont to the west and also east of St. Lawrence Blvd., because of the extremely heavy traffic on Park Avenue, St. Lawrence Blvd. and Mount Royal Avenue, young children in the area are effectively cut off from play space and have to play in the street. A final point is that St. Urbain Street is itself a very busy North-South traffic artery and all the east west streets are busy throughout the day.

This area is populated largely by immigrants, mostly from Greece, and is characterized by poor housing, high unemployment and under employment, low wages and inadequate education. Delinquency, school drop-outs, and broken families are common and the area has been described in several studies as a "priority zone", in terms of social problems and needs.

Development of the plan

It was in view of this background that in March 1969 the youth department of International YMCA submitted to the city parks dept. a proposal for a recreation project in the alleys of Mile End West. The plan called for the closure of 5 alleys in the district and for the placement of

two trained and experienced workers in each alley, one male and one female, to organize and supervise recreation for the children living in the surrounding blocks. The proposal called on the City Parks Dept. to provide funds to pay the salaries of these ten workers and one supervisor and to provide recreation equipment for the 5 units. The YMCA proposed to recruit and train the workers, provide them with on the job supervision, and to make available the YMCA swimming pool each afternoon for the use of children in the project.

This plan was presented to Mr. René Belisle and at the same time support was sought and received from Mr. Fernand Alie, city councillor for the district, and from Police Station 17. Many parents of children in the area were already strongly in favour of the proposal as it was in response to their fears for their children's safety that the idea arose in the first place.

Problems encountered

At this point the first of our several problems with the inevitable bureaucracy of the city rose. The decision to support the project could not be made immediately since the final decision had to be made by the executive committee. The Parks Dept. was supportive but could not guarantee the proposal's acceptance, although the need to begin interviewing prospective staff was becoming more and more pressing. Some applications for employment had been received and more were coming in every day. Day camps and other summer employers were filling their staff and the need to move while some of the more experienced and qualified staff were still available was acute. Consequently staff was tentatively hired on the chance that the city would not support the project but while no commitment could be made by the YMCA on its own part or on the part of the city, nonetheless the very fact that

highly skilled and qualified staff had to refuse other job offers on the chance of being hired by the city, created an extremely bad situation. It is an indication of their concern for the goals of the project and the welfare of the children concerned, that 11 first-class workers mostly graduates, all with a great deal of experience and excellent references from previous employers, took the chance and promised to work in the alley program if and when the city made up its mind to hire them.

The gamble paid off for ten of the eleven. They were finally informed that they were officially hired on the 2nd of July! By this date they had given up any chance of being hired in any other summer job, had spent one week in training for the unique demands of the alley program, and had spent one full day in the alleys, June 30th, which was the day we had informed citizens that the project would start! Had we waited till the city decided to go ahead with the project, none of the children or their parents would have known of the project and the staff would have been totally untrained on the 2nd of July - over a week after school closing! How many additional traffic accidents this could have led to is of course unknown, but on the 30th of June, after a small promotion campaign in the district, close to 1,000 children appeared in 5 alleys at 10 A.M. when the monitors arrived for the first day's program!

Continued difficulties

It will be noted that the hiring gamble paid off for ten of the eleven workers. For one the difficulties were far from over. The City parks Dept. has a rule that no two members of the same family may be hired to work for the department at the same time. As a result of this ruling one member of our staff team, Miss Ellen Lakoff, ironically one of the most experi-

oned of the whole group, was informed on July 2nd that she was unemployed because her brother was hired! This was the first mention that had been made of the rule and she like the rest of the staff could easily have had other jobs during June had she wanted. The fact that she particularly wanted to work in this district on these kinds of problems, meant that she had refused other jobs on the chance of working in Mile End West. An immediate appeal was made against this ruling and Mr. Parent of the Parks Dept. promised to appeal it in view of the special circumstances. This was done and the ruling was reversed on July 22nd. Miss Lakoff was paid from that date but this meant she had worked for 3 weeks in the project without pay. She has still not been paid for this period!

While I have spelled out the above difficulties there were many more, less serious ones, which space does not permit me to expand on. Generally the relationship between the Y and the Parks Dept. was cordial and mutually helpful and this only serves to underline the ridiculous and unnecessary nature of some of the problems we had. Equipment supplied to the project was ancient and, as an example, many of the balls we received were already burst when we got them. Cleaning of the lanes was erratic at best, and only after continued complaints was any action taken. Arts and crafts equipment was not made available until the second week of program was almost over and then only a basic minimum was granted. At the two co-operative functions involving other parks with the alley program, it was obvious to all how poorly our children were equipped compared to others. Our staff were not called to sign on at the Parks dept. - a procedure we didn't even know was necessary - until the day after the program started and consequently they were not paid for the training week and the first day of program as they could only be paid from

the day they signed on. This contretemps was finally settled in the last week of the program, but it caused much unnecessary damage to staff morale in a situation which was already quite demoralizing due to the depressing surroundings. The number of children involved each day varied between 200 and over 700 and this I feel indicates the value of the program to this community. The Parks Dept. is to be congratulated for its support of the program and it's to be hoped that next year bureaucratic difficulties will not be placed in the way of the smooth efficient operation of the program.

Program highlights

Typical programs initially were located in the lanes since this was the centre for the children to identify with. After three or four weeks, regular groupings of children had formed in each lane and consequently the groups could move out of the lane for a day at a time without leaving children behind. Thus great use was made of Mount Royal and Jeanne Mance Park which could be visited since the monitors were able to supervise street crossing etc. Use was also made of parks within the city of Outremont although several times groups were refused admittance to these latter parks as they were non-residents of the city. Seven hundred visits were made to Man & his World, four hundred on visas supplied by the city welfare dept. and three hundred on visas supplied by C.F.C.F. television. A small party of thirty children from the alleys was entertained on board H.M.C.S. Ottawa which was on a visit to Montreal. Within the alleys themselves art exhibits, olympic days, games, sports, dancing etc. provided the main program content, and one alley presented two performances of its own bilingual version of Cinderella to an audience of parents and children from the other 4 alleys. Children designed and painted their own scenery and costumes and wrote

their own script for this excellent production. Children from the alleys joined children from several parks in a mass field day at Jeanne Mance Park and the final week saw them participate in a city wide day-out at St. Helen's Island. Many more interesting visits would have been made had more staff been available. Valuable assistance was given voluntarily by parents and teen-age volunteers from the YMCA Teen organization but more could have been used. Mention has been made of the shortage of good equipment and of course the physical limitations of the alleys themselves created many problems. The YMCA swimming pool was made available for two hours each day and children from each alley had the opportunity of swimming at least once a week, but in the hot weather this merely served to whet their appetites and was not nearly enough.

Social action

Initial contact was made with quite a few parents by the alley workers. Many parents expressed concern for their children's wellbeing, particularly in view of the dirt, rats and limited space in the alleys. One of the most crowded alleys was between Van Horne and Bernard and the alley backed on to the yard of Edward VII school which was of course locked up and surrounded by barbed wire fencing. Aided by alley workers and an organizer from the Mile End West Project, concerned parents circulated a petition and submitted it to the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal asking that children from the alley be allowed to play in the empty school yard. Permission was granted and much use was made of the yard for the rest of the summer. At the time the program was the subject of very favourable reports and editorials in both the Montreal Star and the Gazette, and Channel 12 television visited the alleys and filmed the program for its news. The

organization of parents concerned with recreation is still in existence and hopes to continue meeting and developing plans for community recreation in the coming fall and winter. As this organization, now part of the Mile End West Project, expands, it is expected to assume a large amount of the responsibility for developing plans for next summer and also for programs during the fall, winter, and spring. It is hoped that the joint venture of the International YMCA Youth Dept. and the City Parks Dept. will be repeated next year with the Parents committee as a third member.

Staff Evaluation

Day to day Supervision and co-ordination of programs was handled by Miss Gita Dranicky, teacher of physical education at Baron Byng High School, and a graduate of McGill University.

Program staff were:

Miss Judy Bucklo	B.A. University of Saskatchewan
Miss Caroline Slater Dowson	B.A. Sir George Williams University
Miss Ellen Lakoff	4th Year McGill
Miss Joyce Halpern	4th Year McGill
Miss P. Arthell Hill	B.F.A, Sir George Williams University
Mr. Gary Kober	3rd year McGill
Mr. Vince Nigro	3rd year Sir George Williams University
Mr. David Lakoff	3rd year McGill
Mr. Bill Giannis	1st year Dawson College
Mr. Arich Bonder	B.A., McGill

Meetings of the total group were held approximately once a week to develop program ideas, clear up problems and provide support to the staff. Miss Dranicky met each staff member each day and one full day

training session was held half way through the program. The performance of the workers was, on the whole outstanding. Needless to say difficulties arose and problems had to be dealt with, but in terms of hours worked, children reached and conditions put up with, the overall effort has to be rated most highly. I would have no hesitation recommending these young people for any position that involved work with children.

Recommendations

1) Hiring Practices

If similar joint ventures are to be undertaken in future it is essential that fairer hiring procedures be developed for specially selected staff. While the present procedures may be adequate for regular park and playground monitors, they are painfully inadequate if staff with special qualifications and skills are to be attracted to special projects such as the alley program.

In the specific case of Miss Ellen Lakoff it is hoped that as a result of reading this report, the recreation dept. will see its way to pay her for the weeks she worked and did not get paid for - the period from July 2nd - July 22nd which by my calculation amounts to 97.5 hours at 1.75 per hour - a total of \$170.62.

2) School yards

Since there are several school yards situated in this district, it is felt that better use could be made of them than is presently being made. The installation of playground equipment, swings, see-saws, climbing frames etc. and the provision of playground monitors would be a welcome step towards solving some of the problems of the children during the summer months. The Alley program demonstrated the need for parks or playgrounds and provided a

temporary, unsatisfactory solution. It should not be seen as an answer to the problem in itself - to anyone who has walked through the alleys in Mid-July the reason will be obvious.

3) Mini-parks

The only long term solution to the problem of youth recreation in the district is the construction of playgrounds. Vacant space is at a premium but careful study should be made of available space and of what has been accomplished in other communities with mini-parks, school yards, etc.

4) Budget

In any future joint project, some small budget should be made available for supplies, bus rentals etc. This would permit greater flexibility and a more satisfying program.

5) Equipment

Condition of the equipment used this summer has been mentioned. This needs to be improved and much more art and crafts equipment is needed. Only a few games can really be successful in the alleys so more emphasis should be placed on creative work.

6) After school program

Since most of the families in the community have both parents working, virtually the same need exists each day after school as existed during the summer. Discussions are under way between YMCA staff, school teachers and principals, parents and children, with a view to setting up a recreation program after school in two of the schools in the district. The initial work on this project will be done by volunteers but it is recommended that the Parks Dept. study this plan with a view to financing it in the future. A

major effort in this field could do a lot to reduce traffic fatalities and juvenile delinquency in the district.

Conclusion

I would like to thank Mr. Marcel Parent for his co-operation throughout the summer. Reference to problems made throughout this report is intended as constructive criticism of a very exciting example of agency/city co-operation and should not be taken as personal criticism of Mr. Parent or of his department. In supporting the Mile End Alley Project the Parks Dept. responded to needs as identified by citizens of the community. Only by many more such responses can the problems of the inner city be attacked and eventually defeated.

FACTS & FIGURES

Program commenced	June 30th
Program ended	August 22nd
No. of days of program	38
Days cancelled due to rain	1
Average total daily attendance	303
Total attendance	11,518
Total attendance in YMCA pool	2,217
Man & his World visas used	700
Number of different children involved throughout summer	Approximately 700